

Los Angeles Times

July 4, 2007

Images dance across the eye

David Michalek captured dancers' movements, then slowed the views so nuances could be appreciated. 'Slow Dancing' will be shown in New York, then in L.A.

By Susan Reiter, Special to The Times

New York — FASTER, trickier, revved up to the nth degree — a lot of what today's dancers do is so highly charged that audiences derive a visceral thrill from its sheer momentum and density. But how much of the dancing does the spectator's eye actually perceive?

Artist David Michalek's new project, "Slow Dancing," suggests that the answer is: far less than you might think. The project employs the latest high-speed video technology to reveal, in ultra-slow motion, all the fascinating preparations, effort and reactions involved in dancers' movements. Each of its 44 portraits transforms a five-second phrase into a 10-minute investigation of manifold subtleties we would otherwise never notice. The dancers initially appear to be captured in stillness, until infinitesimal movements become perceptible and the eye adjusts to the extreme slowness and heightened detail. It's like putting dancers under a microscope.

The installation's world premiere will loom over the plaza of Lincoln Center here starting Tuesday, with dancers' giant images projected simultaneously on three 40-foot screens suspended from the facade of the New York State Theater. In September, "Slow Dancing" will come to Los Angeles in a different configuration — four screens surrounding the Music Center Plaza fountain — to open the fifth season of Dance at the Music Center, the project's initial commissioner.

"It's not taking a snapshot of a dancer — it's recording their technique over time," Michalek, 40, said the other day at his apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Although he began his career in commercial photography apprenticing with Herb Ritts while he was a UCLA undergraduate literature major, these days he prefers not to identify himself as a photographer. "I work in a lot of different mediums. I think at the heart of what I do is portraiture; I'm a portrait artist. I extrapolate endlessly away from the core idea, and I sometimes find myself creating very elaborate substructures just so that I can support that single moment."

Among Michalek's earlier projects were two collaborations with director Peter Sellars, including the film images for "Kafka Fragments," a staged setting of composer György

Kurtág's song cycle performed by Dawn Upshaw. He often creates works that grow out of residencies and prefers to collaborate. This spring, he taught a course at Yale's Graduate School of Art and Religion that tied in with his research for a projected musical collaboration based on the Book of Job.

Fascinated with the possibilities of the latest high-speed digital cameras, Michalek initially experimented with a small one on a subject close to home. He asked his wife, New York City Ballet principal dancer Wendy Whelan, and her colleague Edwaard Liang to dance around the living room. The resolution was low, the images tiny, but he recalled, "That was a real 'Aha!' moment for me. I was really wowed by the affect quality of the slowness."

Locating a camera that would meet the needs of a larger project, however, turned out to be difficult and time-consuming. "Last August, I was about to give up. I couldn't find one with enough aesthetic visual quality," he said, adding that once he met with Nigel Redden, director of the Lincoln Center Festival, and they conceived a plan to project the images on such a vast scale, "my concerns with the quality of the image increased tenfold." His search included Japanese and German cameras, but a new prototype, made by a New Jersey-based company and intended for use by the military, proved to have the necessary capabilities.

Michalek envisioned using those capabilities to reveal the unseen details of a variety of dance artists, spanning many disciplines and ages. An early plan was to shoot 18 dancers, but the list expanded as more dancers were intrigued and eager to participate. It now includes current performers such as American Ballet Theatre's Herman Cornejo, the Merce Cunningham Company's Holley Farmer, Martha Graham principal Fang-Yi Sheu and former Alvin Ailey dancers Desmond Richardson and Dwana Smallwood; choreographers William Forsythe, Trisha Brown, Karole Armitage, Alexei Ratmanský and Bill T. Jones; celebrated former performers Judith Jamison and Allegra Kent; and artists who do krumping, *capoeira*, hip-hop, Javanese court dance, flamenco and more.

Between October and March, this parade of dancers came through a Midtown studio where Michalek scheduled intense Friday-to-Monday sessions to record them at 1,000 frames per second. "I asked them to craft sequences of about five seconds that had a distinctive beginning, middle and end," he said. "We would see how those would interact with the lens, the way the lens perceives space. Often, things that people thought would look interesting slowed down didn't. It was sculpting in time."

Kent, a principal dancer with New York City Ballet from the 1950s to the 1970s, became an eager participant after seeing Michalek's footage of a current NYCB principal, Janie Taylor. "It creates its own tempo, as if it were under water. It's like hair and fabric arrive at the finishing line last," she said. She brought a favorite Schubert trio along to her session and found that "I was racing — I thought it was necessary to squeeze in as much as I could. I was surprised how short seven seconds is."

"Slow Dancing" is Michalek's first venture into public art, and he was intrigued by the

possibility of incorporating Lincoln Center's architecture into the project. "I'm excited to present the work in a way that makes sense for the environment — and, I think, along the way to make some discoveries about how the images will interact and be experienced spatially," he said.

Festival director Redden said "the transformation of a space is very much part of what I feel a festival should be about." He expects the dancing figures to appear "iconic and monumental — and very much in keeping with the New York State Theater as a house of dance. I hope it's going to be mesmerizing. I think people will be fascinated by it."

Renae Williams, the Music Center's director of dance presentations, first met with Michalek last summer. "I was really struck by the artists he had already attracted to the work," she said. "The way the list continued to grow was incredible and very inspiring. These are major dance artists people will recognize or have a personal connection with." "Slow Dancing" will remain on view at Lincoln Center until July 29, then be at the Music Center Sept. 18 to 26, from 6 p.m. to midnight.

"It's definitely taking us in a new direction," Williams said, "both as a commissioner and a presenter of the work. We've never used the plaza in this way. My hope is that it will bring new energy, both when we've got performances going on and also when people come here during quieter times."